



Situation Report

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Ethiopia and Eritrea in Turmoil: Implications for Peace and Security in a Troubled Region

The risk of renewed conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea has increased dramatically with the UN Security Council's termination of its mission (UNMEE) on 31 July 2008. At its height, eight years ago, the mission had included some 3,800 peacekeepers charged with monitoring the demilitarised border that separated the two countries at the end of their disastrous two-year war (1998–2000).

The UN's decision has created a diplomatic vacuum; the international body has all but abandoned its mediation efforts despite the failure to achieve agreement on the highly contentious issue of the precise location of the shared border. Without peacekeepers to monitor the situation locally, any small misunderstanding or misstep could lead to a return to conflict. Indeed, there has been abundant evidence that both sides have been acquiring new weapons, upgrading supply bases, moving large amounts of military equipment and readying troops along their common border.²

The risk of a return to war has increased since the UN withdrawal effectively removed the best means of supporting international mediation efforts. Ethiopia and Eritrea have also faced very little internal pressure to resolve the border conflict because both regimes have used the threat of renewed conflict to justify political repression and to enhance their domestic power through fear. They have done this at the expense of democracy and human rights.³

Furthermore, the critical nature of the dispute has been magnified by its potential impact on the region, particularly the conflict in Somalia, where insurgents backed by Eritrea, battle Ethiopian troops sent to support Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in 2006.⁴ Proxy wars in unstable neighbouring states, such as Somalia or even Sudan, compound problems and prolong regional instability and conflict between ethnically and economically linked states. Such instability, in turn, frustrates growth and dashes all hope for the successful formation of stable governments.⁵ In this way, Ethiopia and Eritrea's unresolved conflict exists as yet another dynamic actively destabilising the entire Horn of Africa region.

The origins of the current standoff along Ethiopia and Eritrea's shared border can be traced to 1991, when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), led respectively by the current Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, and current Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki, overthrew the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam.

Background to
the Conflict

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Mengistu's defeat at the hands of the rebels, brought an end to Ethiopia's 16-year-old civil war. The EPRDF joined with other groups to create the Transitional Government of Ethiopia. In Eritrea, the EPLF established a provisional government, which lasted until April 1993, when the population voted for independence in an UN-monitored referendum. But by 1998, relations between the two countries had deteriorated. There were disagreements over Ethiopian access to the Eritrean ports in Massawa and Assab, and over the precise location of Ethiopia and Eritrea's shared border. Neither government was willing to compromise on these issues.⁶

It was against this background that a small border incident was mishandled and erupted into full-scale war. On 12 May 1998, Eritrean forces moved into the Ethiopian-administered village of Badme following a shooting incident between local militia and an Eritrean border patrol. The Ethiopian prime minister summoned parliament the following day, and issued an ultimatum. Intense diplomatic efforts were launched to prevent war. A joint US/Rwanda proposal was tabled quickly urging that the two sides should withdraw their forces to positions held before the outbreak of conflict and seek a neutral ruling on the location of the boundary that both would accept.⁷ Initially, Ethiopia accepted the proposal, but Eritrea rejected it. Then, after another round of fighting in 1999, Eritrea moved to acceptance, but Ethiopia raised objections. Over the next two years there were three intense military campaigns in which tanks, heavy artillery and warplanes were used on a battlefield characterised by bitter trench warfare.

Historical links and rivalries between the two states, peoples, ruling parties, and leaders made the violence particularly painful. Deep personal animosity between leaders in both Ethiopia and Eritrea, along with the countries' shared political culture that values absolute victory and zero-sum calculations over compromise and joint gains, made peace difficult to achieve.⁸ The war inflicted a massive number of casualties and huge economic costs on both sides. Between 70,000 to 100,000 people were killed and another million displaced.

The fighting finally ended in June 2000 with the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, one of the provisions of which was the creation of a 25-kilometre wide demilitarised Temporary Security Zone (TSZ). On 12 December 2000 the Algiers Agreement was signed, bringing a formal end to the war. That agreement called for an adjudication of the disputed border, settlement of all compensation claims between the two countries and the deployment of 3,800 UN peacekeepers to monitor the TSZ. The neutral Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission was also established to "delimit and demarcate the colonial treaty border based on colonial treaties from 1900, 1902 and 1908 and applicable international law."⁹

The UN effort has largely failed, however, and it is doubtful whether either party to the conflict will independently be able to find a solution. Ethiopia rejected the decision of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission in April 2002 to establish a final determination on the location of the border. Eritrea was furious with the international community for not forcing Ethiopia to comply with its undertakings on the arbitration. Asmara subsequently began introducing a series of limitations on the movement of UNMEE personnel, even restricting the UN's access to fuel. Ultimately, Eritrea expelled the peacekeepers from the TSZ separating the two armies. Eritrea said the border had been legally demarcated, so the UN had therefore completed its mission and the peacekeepers should go.

When the Security Council decided to terminate its mission, this was merely a formal recognition of the reality on the ground. The final detachment of peacekeepers were withdrawn in October 2008, leaving a border where Ethiopian and Eritrean forces are at some places separated by only a few hundred metres.

The possibility that another small incident might ignite yet another war is probable failing a recommitment to an agreement. Two of the largest armies in Africa are facing each other, and both countries have already shown a willingness to risk heavy casualties in war. Were a new conflict to break out on the border, then other

conflicts in the region – particularly in Somalia and quite possibly in the Ogaden – would likely become subsumed in the Eritrean and Ethiopian border conflict.

The threat to the region as a whole is considerable, attributable to a great extent to the tradition of pursuing foreign policy through providing support to proxy forces in neighbouring countries. In the past, Ethiopia has supported Southern Sudanese rebels, which was matched by Sudan's support for Eritrea's independence war. There has also been Somali support for rebels in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, and to lesser extent the Eritrean and Oromo rebellions, which was matched by Ethiopia's past support for Somali rebel groups working against the former government of Siad Barre.¹⁰

Since gaining independence in 1993, Eritrea has in turn actively supported rebellions in Southern and Eastern Sudan, as well as Darfur. It has also supported the Islamists in Somalia and rebels in the Ogaden. These alliances and proxy wars have aggravated an already difficult situation along the shared border between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and they are creating an environment in which further conflict is even more likely.

Therefore, the potential for a border conflict to grow and develop into a larger conflict, where one guerrilla movement would support and fight for another, and then another, is great. Ethiopia and Eritrea have used all means, including that of covert proxy wars, to gain the upper hand. Neighbouring countries such as Somalia and Sudan have felt the fall-out from the war, and experienced the active interference of the two adversaries in their domestic affairs.¹¹

Unfortunately, proxy wars quickly take on an independent life and can prove very difficult for their initiators to control. Often they exist as just one part of a larger strategy of regional hegemony, but even when a war stops, peace does not quickly follow because conditions – both political and economic – are too volatile to allow for instant stability. Ethiopia, for example, will continue to protect its national borders, especially with Somalia, as long as there is no credible or stable national government in place in that country. It will continue to support its allies, to prevent Somali from infiltrating across its southern border.¹²

But continued conflict in a region as volatile and vulnerable as the Horn means that that the state will never be allowed to mature; its formation will never be complete and ethno-regional tension and conflict over materials and politics will continue. Nevertheless, proxy war is an important and enduring feature of the political dynamics of the Horn and is not likely to end until a wider regional conflict-resolution structure is developed.¹³

Ethiopian commanders along the Somali-Ethiopian border have been supplying sympathetic Somali clans with ammunition in accordance with a two-fold strategy: to use the clans as a "buffer" against Somali insurgent activity, thus containing the activities of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), which has been conducting an insurgency against the Ethiopian Government from the cross-border Ogaden region in Ethiopia.¹⁴ Anti-ONLF and pro-Somali Transitional Federal Government border clans have also been befriended by Ethiopian military commanders to secure Ethiopian supply routes into Somalia, according to a UN report. The key route for Ethiopian military and logistic supplies to Baidoa and Mogadishu crosses the border at Doolow; along the road to Baidoa, members of the Marehan clan receive ammunition in return for protection.¹⁵

Eritrea, apparently believing that bad news for Addis Ababa should always be seen as good news for Asmara, has provided support to rebels battling Ethiopian military forces in Somalia. Numerous independent groups have made these allegations, though Eritrea has steadfastly denied them. Towards the end of 2007, some 120 fighters of the *Shabaab*, as the Somali Islamist insurgent youth group is called, travelled to Eritrea for military training at a base near the Ethiopian border. They were trained in the use and assembling of weapons and explosives, in making improvised explosive devices, and guerrilla warfare tactics.¹⁶ After their

initial courses, the fighters travelled to different locations, including an island off the coast of Massawa, Eritrea, for practical training in the use of explosives and other weapons, according to the Monitoring Group. Upon completion of this training, the fighters regrouped in Assab, Eritrea, in preparation for transport to Somalia.

On 7 March, 2008, The UN Monitoring Group sent a letter to the Government of Eritrea, requesting further details. In its reply of 20 March 2008, the latter informed the Monitoring Group, that it had provided neither arms nor any other support to the *Shabaab*.

According to various media reports, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has suggested that it might soon be time to consider ending Ethiopia's nearly two-year military campaign to prop up the weak TFG, though he has rejected calls from opposition groups for a withdrawal timetable.

But alliances and proxy conflicts are not the only forces behind the dispute. The conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea is seen by many as a battle involving private history and personal animosity between Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and President Issayas Afeworki. Their relationship would help explain the intractable nature of the conflict, and their inability to negotiate, even though a normalisation of relations would likely benefit both nations economically. This rather difficult mentality has been deepened by years of guerrilla struggle and now both men appear to believe the other's regime to be on the brink of collapse, which further reduces their incentive to work for a final settlement.¹⁷

As long as another costly war does not erupt, the dispute also serves internal political purposes. Meles and Issayas have used the threat of renewed conflict to frighten their populations and to enhance their domestic power. Elections have been cancelled or postponed, opposition figures have been jailed, and media has been harassed. These actions, in part, were taken to consolidate their power.

Both Issayas and Meles faced serious internal criticism following the war of 1998–2000. Meles was blamed for “giving up Eritrea” in 1993 in the belief this would provide the foundations for an enduring peace, so he cannot forgive Issayas for proving him wrong; his public standing also demands that he allay any suspicion that he might accommodate Eritrean interests at Ethiopia's expense. In Ethiopian official circles it is believed that Issayas's key motive for demanding the implementation of the boundary decision is that he knows it is impossible for Meles to accede to this. For Eritrea, the conflict provides the authorities with the pretext for increasingly totalitarian control. Constitutional and political developments have been frozen since 1998 in the name of war preparedness. Eritreans who urge the need for democratisation and reform are met by the argument that the grave threat that Ethiopia poses to Eritrea's existence means all the fruits of freedom must be put on hold.¹⁸

The Eritrean government's argument for sacrifice has worked for many years. During the mid-1990s, what made Eritrea a well-armed and well-funded foe of Ethiopia was the support the regime received from the Eritrean diaspora. Certainly, the regime can count on a fair amount of economic support from Eritreans abroad, but the amount of money that it received in the past has begun to dry up.¹⁹ In North America and in Europe, the diaspora has shown itself increasingly unwilling to support the regime, and much of this reluctance may be traced to the regime's failure to implement the constitution. It is also a reaction against the authoritarian measures still in effect in Eritrea. The diaspora does not provide the unconditional support to the regime that it did during the 1990s.²⁰

Indeed, in March 2001, shortly after the signing of the Algiers Agreement, fifteen Central Council members of the ruling Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice signed a letter calling on President Issayas to convene the Central Council to debate national policy and check his increasingly personalised and authoritarian leadership. Eleven signatories and scores of supporters were arrested and held

incommunicado, without charge.²¹ This was followed by the arrests of journalists, students and other critical voices; it also led to the indefinite postponement of elections and the expulsion of most international humanitarian organisations.

The diaspora – connected to Eritrea by family – has grown uncomfortable with the authoritarian nature of the regime. Many still have parents, brothers, sisters or other close relatives still living in Eritrea, and many of those people are being forced into national service; others are being persecuted for their political or religious beliefs.²²

National service (originally six months of military training and twelve months of work for the government's development programme) has become open-ended and an estimated 320,000 men and women, some 35 per cent of the productive population, are in the armed forces. The parents of a youth who tries to avoid conscription can be held under arrest until the youth returns, or a \$3,500 fine is paid. Despite these harsh penalties, an increasing number of young people are refusing to serve and fleeing the country.²³

The Eritrean government has become increasingly fragile and its institutions weaker. Its tough exterior image may well conceal multiple factions held together by pragmatic accommodation. Were the dominant institutions and leaders to stumble and appear vulnerable, acquiescence could quickly transform into violent dissent.²⁴

In May 2008, an Eritrean government-in-exile was established in Ethiopia. The Eritrean Democratic Alliance, which consists of 13 Eritrean opposition groups, held a meeting in Ethiopia and adopted a charter that would help it launch a popular uprising. The EDA has repeatedly declared that if it came to power, it would resolve the conflict with Ethiopia through dialogue. On 8 May 2008, it elected Tewelde Gebresselase as secretary-general of the Executive Council and Abdella Mahmoud as chairman of the Legislative Council. The EDA meeting's concluding statement surprisingly included a call to Somalis to resolve their differences peacefully and expressed its support for the peace process initiated by the UN in Djibouti.²⁵

Ethiopia, for its part, has said it is unlikely to attempt to force any change along the border. In 2007, Meles said that he would never go to war with Eritrea, unless, of course, Asmara attacked first.²⁶ Washington's support for Ethiopia, at least for the time being, appears firm, and although the costs of fighting in Somalia and the Ogaden are significant, they remain manageable at current levels.²⁷ Domestically, however, there are problems: the regime is wrestling with the construction of a national post-imperial identity, and this struggle is taking place in a region where ethnicity often trumps nationality or even religion. Though Ethiopia may feel more comfortable than Eritrea with the current stalemate along the border, it is still struggling to forge a single Ethiopian state out of various ethnic groups and regions. About half of Ethiopia's population is Muslim and another 40 percent is Ethiopian Orthodox (Coptic) Christian. In terms of ethnic diversity, the Oromo of southern Ethiopia account for 40 percent of the population, and the Amhara make up about 20 percent. But the Tigre, who account for only 10 percent of the population, constitute the backbone of the ruling EPRDF.²⁸

Evidence of the challenge facing Ethiopia was seen in the violent aftermath of the country's first truly competitive parliamentary elections, held in May 2005. Opposition candidates and supporters were arrested, beaten and intimidated in the run-up to elections and some 9,000 opposition supporters were detained in June following protests at alleged fraud. In November 2005, police killed at least 42 people after protests turned violent; more than 10,000 opposition supporters and demonstrators were detained. Ten new members of parliament, 15 journalists, several human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience were among 86 detainees later charged with treason, genocide and other offences.²⁹

The opposition has been marginalised, but the EPRDF faces serious challenges in relation to two large constituencies essential for any Ethiopian regime to govern

successfully. First, despite 17 years in the ruling coalition, its Oromo wing, the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation, has failed to develop significant support among the Oromo people, and remains in power through intimidation and ever more pervasive systems of monitoring the population.³⁰ The Oromo comprise 40 per cent of the population, and many remain loyal to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) despite its inability to organise openly within Ethiopia since 1993. Without support in the Oromo region or urban areas, the EPRDF's ability to govern is inherently precarious, and reliant upon force, which in turn alienates more of the population. Furthermore, there are signs that dissent is growing within the military and among government officials. In August 2006, for example, Brigadier General Kemal Gelchu defected with some 100 troops to join the OLF in Eritrea. The steady flow of senior judges, officials and military officers into exile suggests an erosion of authority.³¹

Ethiopia's regional struggles in Somalia, and with Eritrea over the port in Djibouti in May 2008, are characteristic of the troubles and internal ethnic issues that have plagued Ethiopia for so many years. Ethiopia is fighting insurgents within its own borders, particularly in the Ogaden, where Ethiopia's Somali minorities live. Historically, Ethiopia has worried about nationalism in Somalia and the ability of the Islamic Courts Union and, in the past, of the regime of former Somali president Siad Barre, to destabilise Ethiopia through its Somali minority in the Ogaden.³²

Ethiopian forces have been extended deep into Somalia, leaving a vacuum for the ONLF to exploit, which is exactly what they did in on 24 April 2007 when they attacked a Zhongyuan Petroleum Exploration Bureau oil facility killing 74 people and abducting seven Chinese nationals, who were eventually released. This attack forced Ethiopia to launch a series of counter-insurgency operations accompanied by the denial of access to commercial goods and humanitarian aid in those areas considered to be ONLF strongholds. These military operations have displaced thousands of people and placed the Ogaden issue under the international spotlight.³³

In May 2008, a new chapter to the dispute opened after Djibouti informed land-locked Ethiopia that it was going to raise the port fees quite significantly. There were a series of meetings in Ethiopia and Djibouti and then, without much explanation, the proposal was dropped and business continued as before.

Eritrea was furious with Djibouti for not taking a harder stand against Ethiopia, but the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea had brought a great deal of business to Djibouti, which had no interest in jeopardising so profitable a relationship. Its revenue has increased dramatically as a result of the five-fold rise in Ethiopian cargo traffic, up to 4.2 million tonnes in 2002 – representing a five-fold increase since 1998. Eritrea's incursion along the Djibouti border shortly after the proposed price increase was dropped, was a very clear demonstration of Asmara's displeasure with Djibouti and Ethiopia. Eritrean ports have not been operating at full potential ever since Ethiopia routed much of its import and export traffic to Djibouti in 1998. Eritrea has lost hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue from the curtailment of traffic.³⁴

Djibouti accused Eritrea of a military build-up at their shared frontier, and Ethiopia, for its part, ominously warned that it was prepared to secure its vital trade corridor with the port of Djibouti in the event of any conflict between Djibouti and Eritrea. "In the face of the unpredictable nature of the Eritrean regime ... Ethiopia will make sure the corridor is safe and sound," Meles said.³⁵

Whatever the logic of the positions it has taken, the international community has been weak and ineffective in its efforts to resolve the crisis along the Ethiopian and Eritrean border. A dangerous precedent was set when the international community failed to force Ethiopia to accept the Boundary Commission's decision on border demarcation. It failed again when it allowed itself to be bullied by Eritrea and its de facto termination of the UNMEE mission.

The United States should take advantage of its good and durable relations with Ethiopia, and the new administration in Washington should push to reopen international mediation and diplomatic efforts. Washington should push for the appointment of a new international envoy with considerable regional standing.

The new envoy should push for an agreeable border demarcation, and also end the regional rivalry between Ethiopia and Eritrea, particularly in Somalia where the government of Ethiopia has backed the TFG, and Eritrea has backed Somali insurgents in their fight against the Ethiopian military and the transitional government in Somalia. Eritrea has also backed rebel groups in Ethiopia in their fight again Addis Ababa.

The new envoy must see the Horn of Africa region as a regional security complex. In the past, insufficient attention has been given to the ways in which countries joined in conflict actively destabilised one another and act as spoilers to derail peace effort. The new envoy should have a clear understanding of how security threats are perceived and articulated in the region, and that could provide a better insight into how to work for peace and stability in the region.³⁶

Ethiopia and Eritrea must accept as final and legally binding the Border Commission's demarcation of the border. This should be followed by cross-border development projects and the withdrawal of Ethiopian and Eritrean troops from the shared border. Incentives, including development project pledges from donors, must be offered to keep both sides engaged. Those incentives must be offered in coordination with the European Commission's Horn of Africa strategy.

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